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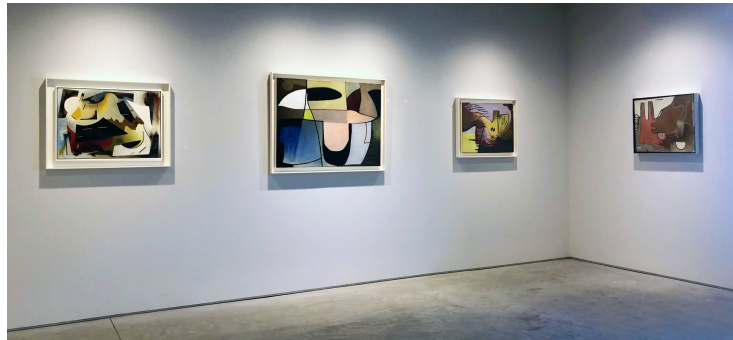


April, 2020

The Realist By John Dorfman

For Alice Trumbull Mason, a little-known pioneer of abstract painting in America, abstraction was the real realism.

One evening in the 1960s, at a meeting of The Club on Eighth Street in New York, a gathering place for abstract artists of all kinds, Ad Reinhardt addressed a few remarks to a colleague whom he had seen in the crowd. "Were it not for Alice Trumbull Mason," he said, "we would not be here nor in such strength." By the time Reinhardt made that statement of gratitude, gazing toward the part of the audience where he thought she was, Mason had already left the room. The anecdote is symbolic of her position in the history of American art. She was a pioneer of abstraction at a time when it was marginalized in this country, a founding member of the American Abstract Artists group, and an eloquent expositor of the principles of abstract art, and yet her name is left out of the canon and is largely absent from discussions of the period during which she was active, the 1930s through 1960s. In more than one sense, Alice Trumbull Mason has been missing from the room.



(From Right to Left) Untitled, 1929, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in., "Spring," 1931, oil on canvas, 20 x 26 in., Untitled, c. 1939, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in., "Colorstructive Abstraction," 1944, oil on masonite, 28 x 20 in.

There is more than one reason why this has been the case. Some have to do with gender. Certainly, as a woman, Mason found it harder to get critical acceptance and gallery wall space in a male-dominated art world. Furthermore, she had children (one of whom, Emily Mason, became a noted abstract painter herself. Profiled in Art & Antiques in February 2018, she died at 88 on December 10, 2019.) and had to divide her attention between child-rearing and painting and promoting her career. While not a self-described feminist, Mason was keenly aware of how these dynamics affected her work and her standing in the art community. It is not often noted that very few of the women who managed to make their way as artists in the early and mid-20th century were mothers. In addition, Mason suffered from alcoholism and depression for decades,

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and while these afflictions do not seem to have reduced her productivity or the level of quality of her work, they shortened her life (she died at 67 in 1971) and made it more difficult for her to play the game in the art world. And finally there is the general lack of sufficient regard for the geometrical and biomorphic abstraction that flowered during the 1920s through '40s, before the Abstract Expressionist explosion of the '50s, when American abstraction became fashionable and broadly influential.

Since we are living in a time of rediscovery and reappraisal in terms of art history, it is high time for an Alice Trumbull Mason revival, and luckily there is one going on right now. A major biographical and critical book has just appeared—the first one ever on the artist, fact—titled *Alice Trumbull Mason: Pioneer of American Abstraction*. Edited by Alisa Wouk Almino and with essays by Almino, Marilyn Brown, Will Heinrich, Meghan Forbes, Thomas Micchelli, and Christina Weyl, it is published by Rizzoli/Electa. Timed to coincide with the book publication is an exhibition at Washburn Gallery in New York, which has long represented Mason and championed her work. It opened on March 19 and will be on view in the gallery's Chelsea space through April 25.

As visitors to Washburn will immediately notice, throughout her career Mason adhered closely to the classic conception of abstraction, which grew out of Cubism and relied on a fundamentally hard-edged approach, whether it be the straight lines of geometric abstraction or the curving, rounded ones of so-called biomorphic abstraction, or a combination of the two. One of her great influences was Piet Mondrian, who was a close friend of hers, especially during the time he lived in New York in the early '40s. One of Mason's greatest paintings, *L'Hasard* (1948), pulses with complex movements in multiple directions in a way that reminds one of the "Boogie Woogie" series that Mondrian painted in New York, though with a color palette more nuanced than Mondrian's primaries.



(From Right to Left) *Oil on Composition*, 1942, oil on composition board, 21 3/4 x 27 5/8 in. Collection of the Newark Museum of Art, 85.357, Gift of Jerry Leiber, 1985.

L'Hasard, 1948-49, oil on masonite, 36 1/2 x 28 3/8 in., Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund, 78.028, Courtesy RISD Museum, Providence, RI, *White Appearing*, 1942, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 7/8 in., Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wolf Kahn, 1978, Collection of the Newark Museum of Art 78.198, *Small Forms Serving Against Large*, 1949, oil on panel, 26 1/4 x 36 1/4 in.

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The title of that painting also hints at another major influence on Mason's particular version of abstract art—modernist poetry. It is a reference to an 1897 poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* ("A throw of the dice will never abolish chance"), in which the unconventional typography and layout of the words on the page are an integral part of the poetic experience. In *L'Hasard*, the short black and brown bars march back and forth across the larger, brighter-colored fields like the words of Mallarmé's poem cross over from one page to the opposite page and double back in irregular, logic-challenging progressions. The reference to dice and chance in both titles implies an embrace of randomness, which upsets easy certainties.

Poetry was an important part of Mason's life. She wrote quite a bit herself—especially while she put her painting on hold in the early 1930s when her children were babies—and had a poem published in the prestigious modernist literary journal *Pagany* after William Carlos Williams, to whom she had sent a draft out of the blue, recommended her to the editors. Similar to her paintings, her poems were abstract, with words chosen for their sound and evocative power rather than their literal meaning. A fan of Gertrude Stein (also a sometime correspondent), Mason liked to use language in subversive ways.

On the other hand, she was a persuasive and logical prose writer when it came to advocating for abstract art. For example, in 1952 she wrote explaining the distinction she drew between "Expressionist" and "Architectural" abstract art, with a clear preference for the latter: "In the middle of the 20th century an American abstract artist may choose to hold up a tragic, expressionist mirror to our time using no formal structure, or may choose to make a painting a positive, architectural construction. Architectural is a fitting word to describe this work. It is building and not destroying. It is making color, density, dark and light, rhythm and balance work together without depending on references and associations. This is my concept of Architectural Abstract Art." Earlier in her career, in 1938, two years after the formation of American Abstract Artists, she wrote a key essay in the AAA's annual brochure titled "Concerning Plastic Significance." The use of the word "plastic" is in accordance with Mondrian's Neoplasticism, but Mason's down-to-earth approach is at variance with the Theosophical mysticism espoused by the Dutch master: "We look for nothing mystical or dreamlike but the magic in the work itself. Abstract art demands an awareness of the intrinsic use of materials and a fuller employment of these means which build a new imaginative world by using them for their own potential worth."

Mason was both imaginative and a realist. Born Alice Trumbull in Litchfield, Conn., in 1904, she was a self-reliant, reserved, and practical New Englander, a Connecticut Yankee descended through her father from the 18th-century painter John Trumbull—a conservative artist with whom, her daughter Emily observed to *Art & Antiques*, Alice Mason likely felt no artistic kinship. When she was a child, her family lived for two years in Italy, where she learned Latin and Greek and studied art at the British Academy in Rome. When her parents moved to New York in 1923, she enrolled at the National Academy of Design, where she studied with Charles W. Hawthorne. The Academy was dyed-in-the-wool conservative, but while she was there Mason met two Russian-born budding modernists, Ilya Bolotowsky and Esphyr Slobodkina, who became good friends of hers and later fellow co-founders of AAA. Back in the Mediterranean in 1927 for a trip, Mason saw archaic Greek, Byzantine, and Italian Primitive art, which made a big impression on her and colored her conception of what abstract art could be. It was also during this trip abroad that she met her husband, Warwood E. Mason, a merchant marine officer who was working on one of the ships she traveled on. They were married in 1930, and despite long separations brought about by his work, some extramarital affairs during those separations (Alice Mason had one with the abstract sculptor Ibram Lassaw during the 1940s, and they remained close friends after she ended it), and drinking problems on the part of both spouses, the marriage proved enduring and sustaining.

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Apart from some early efforts at representation, Mason always painted abstractly. To do that went distinctly against the grain during the 1930s, the decade of the Great Depression. Abstraction was getting hit from both sides in America; the general public and traditionalist critics regarded it as incoherent, incomprehensible, and even un-American, due to its European origins, while leftist artists and critics denounced it as insufficiently socially conscious. Realism, whether of the patriotic American Scene variety or of the leftist Social Realist variety, ruled the day. Those few institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art or the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (precursor to the Guggenheim) that showed abstract art focused almost entirely on European work. In this atmosphere, American abstract artists needed to organize to advocate for themselves; thus the genesis, in 1936, of the AAA. Mason was not only present at the creation but was a creator and sustainer of the group, which still exists today. She served it as treasurer, secretary, and, from 1959 to 1963, president, and exhibited regularly in its annual shows.

While her work was exhibited in other gallery group shows, and she had several solo exhibitions, her career never truly took off, financially speaking. In the late 1940s, along with a number of other abstract painters, she discovered printmaking through the innovative studio of Stanley William Hayter, Atelier 17, and became a dedicated practitioner of print media including etching, aquatint, and woodcut. Printmaking gave her an alternate way to sell her work, but it was also deeply satisfying physically, and Mason's mastery of the difficult techniques is not surprising. In her introduction to the book, Emily Mason recalls that her mother was a do-it-yourselfer "who knew how to make soap from bacon grease."

Mason had the satisfaction of developing an artistic and intellectual bond with her daughter, Emily, but her son, Jonathan, inherited the family tendency to addiction. His father encouraged him to join the merchant marine as a way of avoiding the temptations of the big city, but the solution did not work. In 1958, Jonathan Mason's body washed up in Puget Sound in Washington state. His death at the age of 25, presumed a suicide, devastated his mother. She was hospitalized for depression and alcoholism soon afterward, and she never fully recovered her mental and physical health. Her "Magnitude" series of paintings from the early '60s are superficially bright and airy, with a light pastel-like palette, but there is a subtle sense of psychological confinement. The works from this period move away from the complex multidirectional architecture of the previous ones toward a scheme consisting entirely of vertical strips through which a dark background can be glimpsed through slits.

Ultimately, though, Mason's art should not be read through the lens of personal psychology. While she received patronage from Hilla Rebay, the art guru of Solomon Guggenheim and champion of "non-objective" art, Mason's work is objective rather than subjective. She dismissed the dichotomy between abstraction and realism, or rather redefined the terms. In 1964, toward the end of her career, she said, "The problem is the canvas itself and the organization of the canvas. Of course, I realize that realistic painters face the same problem too, but in a much more superficial manner than abstract artists do, because they can deceive you. ... But when you are faced with only the canvas and the colors and what you are placing on that canvas then you have a tremendous proposition to face, much more less deceptive, let us say, than realistic painting. ... It is the true realism, in case anybody is interested to know."

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